

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2308

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Randy Moore
Chief
United States Forest Service
201 14th St. SW
Washington, D.C. 20227

Chief Moore:

I write today concerned by the recent news that the Superior National Forest will be proposing significant cuts to quotas for entry to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA).¹ Known internationally as America's most visited wilderness, the BWCA prides itself on access to the public, and limiting access to the Wilderness is contrary to the mission of America's public lands and the spirit of the BWCA. My request today is simple: Do not cut quotas for permits to access the BWCA.

Constituent stakeholders and myself have questions about: the economic impact this proposal will have on the area; justification for the action; the lack of consultation with those impacted the most; and what, if any, other remedies were explored before opting to limit access.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a spike in outdoor recreation. The pandemic's darkest days confined us to home quarantines, and the outdoors offered a respite. Our traditions of outdoor recreation beckoned, and Americans renewed their passions of hunting, fishing, hiking, ATV riding, canoeing, and so much more. In fact, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, 7.1 million *more* Americans participated in outdoor recreation in 2020 than in 2019.²

Northern Minnesota was no exception, as the BWCA saw an incredible 16% increase from 2019 to 2020 prior to the wildfire season.³ Cooperators estimate that this boom accounted for a 20% increase to their businesses in 2021 alone.

I therefore am disappointed that the Forest Service, instead of celebrating an increase in visitors and outdoor interest, plans to cut permits following a record-breaking year. Although the Service has declined to share details of the intended cuts directly with my office, estimates from news reports and conversations with constituent stakeholders estimate a net loss of around 32 permits a day. Stretched out across a five-month season for most cooperators, that amounts to a loss of roughly 4,800 permits a year.

Per Recreation.Gov, a permit for the BWCA can cover groups ranging in size from a solo adventurer up to parties of nine. Cutting these permits could potentially mean depriving more than 40,000 individuals from enjoying the Boundary Waters.

¹ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/12/02/forest-service-to-cut-entry-permits-into-the-boundary-waters>

² <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2021-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>

³ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/04/27/pandemicfueled-surge-in-visitation-to-bwca-expected-to-continue-this-year>

For my constituents, that means up to 40,000 people annually not entering stores to rent canoes, pay for towboat usage, or buy fishing gear, maps, souvenirs and more. It also means fewer tanks of gas purchased from local convenience stores on the way home, fewer lodging reservations, and less patronage of local restaurants.

According to MPR News, the Forest Service's justification for cutting permits is due to "overall degradation of the wilderness", crowding, and congestion.⁴ In a meeting between USFS Rangers and staff from my office, we also learned that another justification from the agency is due to "social damage;"

Aside from the cooperator referenced in the MPR News article, constituent stakeholders and I are concerned about a lack of prior consultation. In staff conversations with my office, cooperators communicated to us that this caught them completely by surprise, many of whom received no notification, let alone an opportunity to comment.

Therefore, please answer the following questions:

1. Were economic factors considered when deciding to cut permits?
2. How does the Forest Service quantify "degradation of the wilderness" and "social damage?"
3. Could you please provide all public comments received regarding cutting permit quotas?
4. Could you also please provide correspondence with any group or individual, including but not limited to, Forest Service solicitation of input from businesses, nonprofit organizations, and others?
5. What, if any, other remedies to solve the above issues were explored before opting to cut access?
6. Was the decision to cut permits made at the agency leadership level in Washington, D.C. or locally, in the Milwaukee or Duluth office?

Public lands like the BWCA are available for the public to use. Small business owners built a livelihood around the permit quota system. Therefore, cutting permits means cutting public access, cutting small business opportunities, and cutting our way of life.

Sincerely,



Pete Stauber
Member of Congress

C.C.:
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⁴ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/12/02/forest-service-to-cut-entry-permits-into-the-boundary-waters>